

“With You I Am Well Pleased”

Rev. Debra P. Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
January 10, 2016 Baptism of the Lord, Year C

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

It's my last Sunday here as your pastor, and I hope I can make it through the rest of this service. It's really hard to say goodbye, but as your elders and I have told you, it has to be a real goodbye. It's important for you to move forward with a new pastor, and not hang on to the past. But I really appreciate all the fuss you've been making over me. It was an amazing and perfect party last night. You put in a tremendous amount of time and effort and love, and I will treasure that time always. I thank you for the gifts, but especially for all the love and affirmation you have been sending my way. It makes it harder to leave, but I'm leaving with a full heart.

Before I leave, however, there's one thing I have to scold some of you about. I don't know who you are, but I have heard that a few of you have said you will stop coming to church after I leave. I hope that was a joke, because if you're not joking, you missed the point of what I've been trying to do these last 15 years. I have poured out my soul here, but not to build a cult of Debra-followers. My deepest desire is for you to experience God in your own life, and follow in the way of Jesus Christ. And if you can't find joy in following Jesus without me around, I'm afraid I failed.

Now, I'm not a “Jesus freak,” although I was when I was a teenager way back in the 1960's. I don't believe “Jesus” is the answer to every question. And I don't even care whether or not you believe Jesus is God. Whatever you believe or don't believe about him, Jesus is the source and power of the Christian faith. He brings us into the presence of God and shows us how to be real human beings who are free to love, free to serve, and free to be the people God created us to be. You may like my personality, or not. But what has made this ministry successful over the last 15 years is not my personality. It is the spirit of Christ. And the pastor is not the only one who has access to that spirit. You all do.

I've been cleaning out the files in my office lately. And I came across the results of a survey we took here, after your former pastor left. He had served for 20 years and many people said they couldn't imagine the church without him. But some people wrote that his departure forced them to think more deeply about faith, and to discover their own faith, apart from the church and the pastor. Yes, it makes a difference to have a good leader and teacher. But each of us has to come to terms with Jesus, and not just what *other people* say about him. We have to let him speak to us himself through his words in the gospels, and receive the relationship he offers us with God.

In some ways, I feel like John the Baptist in the passage Tom read from the gospel of Luke this morning. John told the crowds, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I, (...one whose sandals I am not worthy to touch or untie...He) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” I have baptized some of you here, and many of your children. It's one of the most joyful things a pastor can do. But the power of a baptism does

NOT come from me. I just pour the water and sometimes shed a few tears. The real power comes from the Holy Spirit, and your own opening to God in that experience.

Tom read this morning that when Jesus was baptized, heaven was opened and a voice said to him, “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased.” When we are baptized, God says those same words to us. We are welcomed into God’s family, loved and cared for. Each one of us is precious in God’s sight. And God’s delight in Jesus was not based on anything Jesus had already done. Jesus began his work after all this. God’s love for Jesus was the beginning and foundation of everything Jesus was to do from then on. It gave him the confidence and power to act in the world.

David read from the prophet Isaiah this morning. “I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned... because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you... Do not fear, for I am with you...” That message was delivered thousands of years ago to God’s chosen people, the Israelites, who were coming to the end of their time in exile. God declared his love and care for them, and promised to be with them and gather them back together. And we believe those promises were made universal in Jesus Christ.

Ten years ago I had the confirmation class read that same passage from Isaiah and tell me which phrases struck them as most important. One person chose the first verse, “I have called you by name, you are mine.” Someone else chose “...because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” Yet when I asked the class whether they felt that *they* were precious in God’s sight, that God loved *them*, not one of them could respond. It’s not as though they *disbelieved* it. It just wasn’t part of their experience they could talk about. And I couldn’t come up with any words to convince or encourage them otherwise.

What does it take to realize God’s love for us? I don’t know the answer to that question. I don’t even remember how it happened for me, except at some point in my teen years I heard it and wanted to believe it. Maybe it’s just a matter of desire. Or maybe it’s something we have to take on faith until we experience and know it. According to Luke, it happened for Jesus at his baptism as he prayed. And when we pray, our hearts and minds can be opened to God’s love, just as the heavens were opened for Jesus.

If you are one of those people who wants or needs to know God’s love in your life, you can pray and ask God to show it to you. God answers those kinds of prayers. But also pray that your eyes may be open to see, because sometimes God’s love comes in unexpected ways. So if you decide to pray, you also need to pay attention. And as we experience God’s love for us, God gives us the freedom and power to love others. We don’t keep it to ourselves. We pass it on.

You have certainly passed a lot of love on to me, and I want to thank you for a wonderful 15 years here. Thank you for giving me the chance to be your pastor, for worshiping with me, and working with me, sharing your wisdom, life experience, time, talents and resources with me and with the church. I have said many times that a pastor can only be as good as the congregation he or she serves. You are a faithful and generous congregation, and I am honored to have been allowed to work here.

It took you a while to get used to me. I don't know if you remember, but nobody laughed at my jokes when I first got here. After a few years you started to catch on to my brand of humor, and now you laugh, even when I didn't mean to make a joke. Thank you for allowing me to be a real human being who makes mistakes, and doesn't always say what I mean, or know what to do.

Thank you also for being willing to try almost anything at least once, and also letting me know when something we tried didn't work. Thank you for being so good at set-up and clean-up, and caring for this building as you do your own home. But thank you also for caring even more about mission and loving your neighbor. Thank you for being willing to give up control, and share responsibility and power with new people. And even when you do have the urge to control (which we all know some of you do), thank you for keeping a sense of humor and allowing others to do things differently. Thank you for being brave enough to attend a church where not everyone speaks your language, and for believing you have a place here. Thank you for overlooking each other's weaknesses and focusing instead on the good things they have to offer. Thank you for forgiving each other. Thank you for loving each other. As Betsy said last night, that's the greatest gift you can give me, to get through this transition well, to pray together, to respect and honor your differences, and to love each other.

I love you all, and I love this church. But most important, God loves you. So as I leave, I want you to remember your baptism, that God has claimed you as his own and you belong to God. It doesn't matter whether it's me or someone else who sprinkles the water on your head. The message and power are not in the water itself or the hand that delivers it. The power is in the Holy Spirit and the voice of God. You can know that when you pass through the waters, the rivers, the fire, the hardships of life, God has promised to be with you. You are precious in God's sight, and honored, and God loves you. Remember that always, and God will guide us all into our next adventures in faith.

God bless you, in Jesus' name. Amen.